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## School environment and sense of identity of people in their late adulthood by the example of Cieszyn Silesia

### Summary

The following study depicts a relation between school and identity of people in their late adulthood, who live in the Polish and Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia. The author shows education as the only way to personal development. The results presented point the fact that if positive educational habits are implemented when a person is young, they benefit in adulthood and elderly age.

The following study is to present research results conducted in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn in 2013. Quality and quantity strategy were used and they were complementary. A questionnaire, interview and quality data analysis were chosen as the research tools.

The results confirm that positive attitudes enhancing life-long learning are created in primary education and further. According to elderly, school and pedagogical staff were significant in creating their identity. For the elderly continuing education means gaining new skills, qualifications, deepening interests, what is even more important it is the way of self-expression and own identity creation.

**Keywords:** school, education, elderly, late adulthood, identity, Cieszyn Silesia.

School is an institution where people spend significant part of their lives. It is environment where teachers, students and pedagogical staff enable intergenerational cooperation. Considering school as environment, it is perceived as one of the elements of socio-pedagogical and socio-institutional environment.

Nowadays learning is not reserved for children or youth only. It is a process in which adults and elderly take part too. People in their late adulthood have

need of constant education, it enables them to gain skills of solving problems of quick changing world. Elderly want to learn in order to orient themselves better in the fast moving world.

Undertaking education by people in their late adulthood has become alternative to finished professional life. It is the evolution of humans' lives, currently socio-cultural context of gaining knowledge has change, experience gained by an adult in the process of learning has increased. Reflecting upon the role of school in creating one's identity is vital because "identity is a task of both the educator and the learner" (Szczurek-Boruta, 2014, p. 286).

While researching I tried to answer the question: 'How do people in their late adulthood perceive the role of school in their own identity creation?'

I assume that the correlation between school and identity of people in their late adulthood exists. The survey results presented were part of research conducted for the doctoral thesis<sup>1</sup>.

My theoretical consideration is in reference to education view by Erik H. Erikson, who emphasizes the significant role of education played in society from ages. Erikson pays attention to inclusion of education in the process of identity creation as well. He claims that „education for *ego* identity, which grows in strength because of varied historical circumstances, needs conscious emphasis done by adults [...] and deliberate effort in providing it to children (Erikson 1968, p. 83).

The research was conducted in Polish (Cieszyn) and Czech part (Czech Cieszyn) of Cieszyn Silesia. Cieszyn Silesia is located in the southern part of Polish-Czech border – the area is the point of contact and interfusion of traditions, customs, behaviours of different cultural groups. The term 'borderland' is associated with territorial, cultural, religious and emotional borders.

The survey was made in associations, institutions and organizations located in two socio-cultural centers in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn, such as:

- Cieszyn University of the Third Age,
- Intergenerational Regional University in Czech Cieszyn,
- Daily Care Center for Seniors Activity in Cieszyn,
- Seniors' Club in Cieszyn.

Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn are two neighbouring cities which are located on the area of historical territory of Cieszyn Silesia.

The research involved people in their late adulthood. The definition of late adulthood is interpreted as "the period of getting older which is traditionally called elderly. The boundaries of this developmental period are from 55 to 60 years old and more" (Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2000, p. 15, 263). People in

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<sup>1</sup> The topic was vastly described in the doctoral thesis by K. Jas. Sense of identity of people in their late adulthood – studies and experiences by the example of Cieszyn Silesia. Doctoral thesis written under the direction of dr hab. A. Szczurek-Boruta. University of Silesia Faculty of Ethnology and Educational Science in Cieszyn.

that age create a specific group with their background, emotions and professional experiences. Late adulthood period of life is correlated with the time of retirement, when a single person experiences hard times in life. At that stage people make summary of their existence. Such situation may enhance further creative development or generate negative tension caused by dealing with identity crisis. Therefore, recognizing ways of dealing with identity crisis in this age group seems to be interesting.

A questionnaire – as a method of quantity data gathering – was used in the research, according to K. Rubacha typology (Rubacha, 2008, p. 132). The questionnaire was prepared in Polish for people residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia and in Czech for those who live in Czech part of the area. In order to gain an insight to the knowledge found in quantity research, a quality data gathering method was used – the interview. The following research step was analysis of quality data. Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman indicate three ways of such data interpretation: interpretivism, social anthropology, cooperative social research (Miles, Huberman, 2000, pp. 8–9). The first method mentioned – interpretivism – was used assuming that the interviewee gives meaning to facts because of their current or remembered experiences<sup>2</sup> (Szcurek-Boruta, 2013).

Family socialization and local environment socialization are considered as one of the ways of physical, mental and social development, so is education. This is because it gives a person a kind of impulse to undertake different activities and involve in social roles. “Socialization on the borderland is created by multidimensional social bonds, which occurred due to different groups coexistence, mutual influence, relations and dependences” (Grabowska, 2000, p. 71).

School is a crucial place in individual and social development of a person. It plays a significant role in assimilating learners to local environment conditions (Feinberg, Soltis 2000).

School has even more significance in societies which are culturally and socially varied. School is a place where one can gain knowledge about relationships with Others, learn about Others and this is because “it gives a student a kind of feeling of being a subject and existence in a certain culture” (Urlińska, 2007, p. 327).

Each society functions are: maintaining existence, developing identity and cooperation with various societies. “Educational institutions were founded to prepare society members to both of the functions, however the first is emphasized. Nowadays, in times of pluralism globalization, multiculturalism there appear other social needs, and the basic tasks are fostering alterity, local, regional, national, European, civic and global identity development. Education’s most

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<sup>2</sup> Selection and study according to perspective presented by A. Szcurek-Boruta in *Social experiences in preparing teachers for working in multicultural environment*. Toruń 2013, Adam Marszałek Publishing Company.

important role is to create culture elements which are to decide on alterity (Szczurek-Boruta, 2014, p. 297).

Creating new culture elements is based on individual experiences gained in the past, finding values and experiencing them “for better life now, for accepting one’s self-transformation through becoming more and more mature for today, for tomorrow, by constant designing of one’s life, by noticing future perspectives, even though the perspectives are connected with next day, week or month” (Czerniawska, 2000, p. 198–190).

Education plays a significant role in creating human’s identity. It allows to find oneself in the world of values and new social roles.

According to Jerzy Nikitorowicz, education is to prepare aware and responsible generations to living in understanding and empathic dialog, generations who realize their own identity and support others in the same actions, but at the same time they would search for and realize humanistic, contributing and timeless values (Nikitorowicz, 2005). School is a place where students spend considerable amount of their day, so of their lives too. It is a place of undertaking and realizing different activities, a rich source of experiences gained during the activities done. School should enable dealing with everyday life by “paying attention to the necessity of looking at past life, taking experiences into consideration, passing those experiences along and enabling coping with dailiness” (Szatur – Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska, 2006, p. 168).

A teacher is a person who significantly influences a student at school. A teacher conditions interpersonal relationship, he or she is a person who creates mental, emotional, physical and social development of a student. Due to the actions undertaken, a teacher is also important in creating identity. Many times a teacher becomes an authority figure who influences one’s development throughout the whole life. The important role of a teacher in creating identity was also mentioned by people in their late adulthood [Table 1].

In their views school and pedagogical staff are significant in creating identity. Both Polish and Czech citizens of Cieszyn Silesia pointed teachers’ as factors crucial in creating their own identity. 41,33 % of people from the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia claim that teachers and their actions influenced their identity creation. The same opinion was expressed by 45,71 % of people residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia. Respondents views confirm Alina Szczurek-Boruta’s thesis that “teachers are significant people, they provide their students with knowledge, but also with pressure needed at the certain period, and thanks to them further educational career of youth is possible, at least at secondary level of the education” (Szczurek-Boruta, 2014, p. 297). Discerning and appreciating teachers as those who greatly influenced identity creation, which is claimed by people in their late adulthood, prove the fact that pedagogical staff activities were significant in creating attitudes which appear in adult lives of respondents.

Table 1

*Late adulthood people perception of school environment contribution to identity creation (percentage data presented)*

categories	in total				PL				CZ		
	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"	"1"	"2"	"3"
teachers	2,73	2,73	28,18	42,73	2,67	4,00	26,67	41,33	0,00	31,43	45,71
peers	1,82	0,00	30,00	12,73	1,33	0,00	22,67	14,67	5,71	45,71	8,57
Non-pedagogical staff	11,82	7,27	5,45	2,73	13,33	4,00	1,33	4,00	0,00	14,29	0,00
others	1,82	0,00	0,00	0,91	1,33	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	2,86

Legend:

"0" – none

"1" – poor

"2" – average

"3" – huge

PL – people in their late adulthood residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia

CZ – people in their late adulthood residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia

Caution: the results do not sum up to 100% due to the possibility of giving more than one answer.

Source: own research.

Quantity research results were confirmed by quality research results. Statements gathered in interviews with people in their late adulthood point the significant role of teachers in identity creation process. It can be illustrated by the following respondents' accounts:

Teachers are not thought well, it didn't use to be like that, we, as students had nothing to say, when I got into mischief I even got hit from the teacher. No teacher told us that they had been creating our identity one time, and hadn't been doing it other time. I think, teachers in secondary school created our identity by the way they were teaching us, by the way they were talking with us, the way they treated us. They formed us and prepared to adulthood (Interview no 5, a man residing in the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

I didn't have the only one teacher at school who influenced my identity, but I think that teachers' contribution to my sense of identity creation was huge. We spent lots of time at school, we used to go there even on Saturdays, students respected all teachers a lot, they were strict, and when teaching they relayed not only knowledge to us but also moral fibre, they taught us life, what kind of people to become (Interview no 6, a woman residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Durability and continuity of teachers' influence were emphasized by residents in their interviews.

We still keep in touch with our form master, she taught us Russian in our Technical College, she didn't have an easy life with us, but she always pleaded us. Sometimes she shouted at us, but she guarded us against other teachers, even against our parents. She helped many of us, showed how to solve problems, how to live. For me she was an ex-

ample of a good human being, she was for sure a person who influenced my identity and me as a person now (Interview no 10, a woman residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Elderly point out that teachers relayed both knowledge and moral fibre. Understanding way of upbringing, which was preferred by teachers, caused forming open attitudes towards others according to the surveyed elderly.

School environment is also created by peers and non-pedagogical staff. A group of peers gives natural opportunity to contact, meet, interact with other people, who are often different in terms of physical appearance, outlook or emotional aspects. Alterity of other people influences identity creation process.

Relationships with peers condition creating one's own I. In hindsight, peers seem not to be a significant factor in creating identity of people in their late adulthood. Only 8,57% of respondents living in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia claim that peers influenced their identity creation notably. Similar percentage of respondents (14,67%) of people living in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia claimed their peer influence on identity creation was important.

However, the fact is that they do notice some significance of peers. According to 22,67 Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia residents and 45,71% of those who live in the Czech part of the area, peers identity creation contribution is rather small.

Elderly statements bring memories about their friends and peer and their role which was played in creating their sense of identity.

My identity was also formed by a school sport club, the team to be precise – my teammates and I played football, thanks to that I know the feeling of success. The relationship with my friends was important, we were a team, we could rely on each other, sometimes we had arguments, but that hardened our friendship (Interview no 12, a man residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

I keep in touch with some of my school friends, some of them have already died, but we meet regularly with some. Peers had some influence on my identity for sure, at some age a friend is very important person to you. In my opinion those relationships created my personality because the contacts were important, I learnt how to function among others, what to choose in social situations, how to be different from others, how to be a member of a group not to follow them without thinking (Interview no 2, a woman residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Therefore, it can be assumed that peer relationships are strongly anchored in humans' psyche, even when being in their late adulthood respondents consider these relations as important and claim they influenced the creation of sense of identity.

The type of school is also meaningful for the research seniors. People in their late adulthood credit certain types of school with different significance in creating their identity.

Kindergarten, vocational school and university were seldom mentioned by surveyed people. It is the result of the fact that low percentage of respondents attended kindergartens (data taken from interviews). Small group of respondents declared vocational (10%) and higher (27,27%) education.

Primary schools are the basis of the education ladder and their influence, as shown in own research, on creation of respondents' identity was significant (45,33% PL and 54,29% CZ). Primary school duty is to make students aware of the fact that "knowledge and skills gained while formal learning (in educational system) are only basis – foundation of further education" (Kwiatkowski 2006, p.27). This duty is realized during lessons and varied extra curriculum classes – activity school clubs. The respondents emphasize the importance of activity school clubs and choirs.

Primary school influenced my identity, especially school theatre club, where I performed and played different roles. The teacher, who led the club, was like a mother for all of us, rehearsals were simple opportunity to meet, to practice speaking skills but also to talk about our roles, both good and bad, and about the way we should behave. Being in higher grades I started attending a school choir. We sang at all school ceremonies. School is not only about learning and friends, it is also about developing interests. Thanks to that, I could attend a school theatre club and a choir in primary school and I have understood that art is important to me, it makes me more sensitive. I used everything I learnt after that and this is why I believe primary school is really important in creating one's identity. They didn't suppress things I liked, I could sing and play (Interview no 6, a woman residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Table 2

*Late adulthood people perception of certain educational institutions' contribution to identity creation (percentage data presented)*

categories	in total				PL				CZ			
	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"	"0"	"1"	"2"	"3"
kindergarten	14,55	5,45	8,18	16,36	13,33	5,33	9,33	13,33	17,14	5,71	5,71	22,86
primary school	1,82	6,36	17,27	48,18	1,33	5,33	17,33	45,33	2,86	8,57	17,14	54,29
vocational school	3,64	2,73	8,18	4,55	1,33	1,33	9,33	5,33	8,57	5,71	5,71	2,86
grammar school	1,82	0,91	20,00	27,27	0,00	1,33	20,00	20,00	5,71	0,00	20,00	42,86
technical college	6,36	1,82	6,36	27,27	2,67	2,67	8,00	34,67	14,29	0,00	2,86	11,43
university	8,18	5,45	5,45	12,73	4,00	6,67	5,33	10,67	17,14	2,86	5,71	17,14

Legend:

"0" – none

"1" – poor

"2" – average

"3" – huge

PL – people in their late adulthood residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia

CZ – people in their late adulthood residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia

Caution: the results do not sum up to 100% due to the possibility of giving more than one answer.

Source: own research.

School institutions were the second, just after my family, to create my identity, (I didn't attend any kindergarten, my grandmother took care of me), they caused, from primary to



vocational school, I could live in a group, in society. This is why I have good relationships with my neighbours now (Interview no 1, a man residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

The statements about school teaching team work and existence in a group seem valuable.

Such school role perception, expressed by people in their late adulthood, may be inspiring for contemporary search for better schools which are to be related with developing team work, building communities, school society as the prototype of future society.

Vocational school functions are mainly realized in terms of professional education. Vocational education is directly related the labour market. Stefan M. Kwiatkowski enumerates main aims of this kind of education: preparing to life and creative work in a democratic country; teaching general vocational skills which are helpful when changing job characteristics, creating communicative skills, creating searching and processing information skills, creating positive attitude to further self-education (Kwiatkowski, 2006).

Vocational schools educated a big number of qualified workers and craftsmen. One of Cieszyn citizen's statement shows that this is her profession which kept her staying in Cieszyn Silesia, and as it can be assumed, it influenced her sense of identity.

I feel Polish, I feel Silesian, and the profession learned kept me here, at this area (Interview no 2, a woman residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Czuję się Polką, czuję się Ślązaczka, zdobyty zawód związał mnie z tym terenem (Wywiad nr 2, kobieta mieszkająca w polskiej części Śląska Cieszyńskiego).

The biggest significance in creating one's identity is credited by people in their late adulthood to secondary school, no matter if it was grammar school or technical college. In total 58,67% of people residing in Polish and Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia perceive secondary school as the institution which had big impact on creating their sense of identity [Table 2].

In total 54,67% of people in their late adulthood residing in Polish and Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia claim that secondary school was significant for their development. Residents of Cieszyn part of Cieszyn Silesia depict stronger influence of technical college (34,67% PL) than of grammar school (20,00% PL) (Table 2). It is obvious because of the Polish educational system structure in the 50s and 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were more technical colleges than grammar schools then.

Similarly 54,29% of residents of Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia claim secondary school was significant in their own identity creation process. Grammar schools influence was declared by 42,86% of respondents residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia, whereas only 11,43% of testees chose technical colleges in that case.

The perception of secondary schools influence on identity creation is presented in the following statements.

Secondary school gave me the education, I learned there many positive features such as work, conscientiousness, order, intelligence. It strengthened the issues which were imposed on me by my family, the person I should be, the way I should live (Interview no 3, a man residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia).

I started creating my identity in secondary school, when I entered it, I became self-reliant, I had to make choices which might have influenced my further life. It was the time when I made decisions about my adulthood, work which I wanted and was able to do (Interview no 10, a woman residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Only family is responsible for my identity, for who I am, next the teachers just confirmed what was hardened by my parents (Interview no 6, a woman residing in Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Those who have higher education emphasize the weight and the meaning of one's identity, its revealing and presenting in surrounding other than Cieszyn Silesia. Big impact of higher education was pointed by 12,73% in total (including 10,67% PL and 17,14% CZ) [Table no 2].

University studies caused that I started to familiarize with new environment, which didn't change me as a person. There were people from whole Poland at my university, different behaviours, different customs, I could learn that, experience the fact that despite the huge differences between us, we had lots of topics to discuss, we had interests in common, nobody imposed anything on anybody because it was important to be yourself. Identity is important when we have to live in another environment (Interview no 14, a woman residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

Time of my studies was the best period, I could develop, gain knowledge and learn, I could create and learn myself (Interview no 13, a man residing in Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia).

School has always been engaged in the process of children's and youth's socialization, especially the school from the borderland. It is confirmed by research results conducted in the borderlands by study centres in Białystok, Cieszyn, Opole (Nikitorowicz, Sobecki, 2000; Lewowicki, Szczurek-Boruta, 2000; Jasiński, 2010).

Schools' tasks in the borderlands are relaying knowledge about different cultures, teaching tolerance, openness and respect to alterity and dissimilarity. Culturally differed area enables people to participate in various society lives, use their heritage, experience other cultures every day. "Education in the borderlands promotes intercultural education with inclusion of equal treating and respecting minority groups' needs" (Nikitorowicz, 1995, p. 51).

Alina Szczurek-Boruta notices that „school is a place where, apart from upbringing, intensive process of cultural anchoring takes place. Internalized symbols and ethnic culture paradigms are very important reference which should be used” (Szczurek-Boruta, 1999, p. 157).

## Conclusions

The Quantity and quality of own research results show that paradigms gained in childhood and teenage ages are copied in adulthood and late adulthood as well. Elderly constantly create their own identity. It is enabled by their educational activity.

Own research results depict that educational practices once introduced to a person when a child, will benefit in adulthood and late adulthood. Education becomes a pleasure, way to gain new skills and qualifications, alternative for spending pass time for people in their late adulthood. This is the way students' of the Third Age University, who cultivate life-long learning idea, perceive education. Active seniors' participation in Universities of the Third Age proves that education has become a lifestyle, following the rule that "learning not only participating in organized form of education means being aware of educational situations in life and throughout life, it means being open to yourself and to others, to the world" (Czerniawska, 1997, p. 19).

Elderly education takes into consideration knowledge, attitudes and skills which cause their lives better quality. We learn not only at school, we learn in life and throughout life, because education is a lifestyle. In the past few years continuing education was highly ranked. Life-long learning and building society based on knowledge influence individual development as well as whole society development. Positive attitudes enhancing life-long learning are present at the primary and further educational levels.

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## **Środowisko szkolne a poczucie tożsamości osób w wieku późnej dorosłości na przykładzie Śląska Cieszyńskiego**

### **Streszczenie**

W opracowaniu wskazuję na związek między szkołą a poczuciem tożsamości osób w wieku późnej dorosłości, mieszkających w polskiej i czeskiej części Śląska Cieszyńskiego. Ukazuję edukację szkolną jako jedną z dróg prowadzących do wszechstronnego rozwoju człowieka. Zaprezentowane wyniki badań wskazują, że zaszczerpione w jednostce w okresie dzieciństwa dobre praktyki edukacyjne owocują w życiu dorosłym i w starości.

Niniejsze opracowanie jest komunikatem z badań przeprowadzonych w Cieszynie oraz Czeskim Cieszynie w 2013 roku. Strategia ilościowa i jakościowa zastosowane zostały jako komplementarne względem siebie. Posłużono się ankietą, wywiadem oraz analizą danych jakościowych.

Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań wskazują, że pozytywne postawy sprzyjające uczeniu się przez całe życie kształtowane są na poziomie szkoły podstawowej i kolejnych szczeblach edukacji. W opiniach osób w wieku późnej dorosłości szkoła oraz personel pedagogiczny zajmują znaczące miejsce w kształtowaniu tożsamości. Dla osób starszych edukacja ustawiczna to zdobywanie umiejętności, kwalifikacji, poszerzanie swoich zainteresowań, ale przede wszystkim droga do wyrażania samego siebie, kreowania poczucia własnej tożsamości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** szkoła, edukacja, osoby w wieku późnej dorosłości, tożsamość, Śląsk Cieszyński.